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The Men Who Failed Us

by [Sanaa Qureshi](#)

As the sexual assault allegations against Cristiano Ronaldo gain wider public scrutiny, fans must examine how and why we put footballers on pedestals.



(Wikimedia Commons)

cw: sexual assault

I may never have loved him as a footballer or a person, but I have always cared about Cristiano Ronaldo.

It has been hard not to. For a long time I cared because he was a precocious new talent and I was curious, like a lot of football fans. I then cared because he was living up to and beyond the hype, breaking records and propelling the teams he was in to sustained success. I also cared because he was a man, by virtue of being invested in his own appearance, plagued by homophobic slights, both blatant and coded.

I cared about him when Portugal won the European Championships in 2016, he suffered an injury within ten minutes, was substituted within thirty and took home a winners' medal. Most recently, I cared because a local sculptor from his hometown created a much maligned bust of him to celebrate the renaming of Madeira Airport in his honour.

I have cared deeply about Ronaldo because watching footballers create art is the shortest distance I can find to travel between wordly despair and otherworldly delight. And now, I care because Cristiano Ronaldo is accused of raping Kathryn Mayorga. And I believe her.

The first time this was reported on was in 2017 when (<http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/der-spiegel-football-leaks-exclusive-cristiano-ronaldo-rape-allegation-a-1143910.html>), via Football Leaks, *Der Spiegel* revealed a set of documents between Kathryn Mayorga's lawyer at the time and Ronaldo's legal team detailing an agreement of silence and a payment of \$375,000. The papers *Der Spiegel* acquired indicated that there was an accusation of rape made, with the victim sharing the same horrific details that have recently re-emerged now that her identity has been revealed.

I can't pin down why the accusations only really took hold for me when Kathryn Mayorga stepped forward. I'm not sure what I was waiting for, or what kind of proof I thought I needed to be able to hold this part of Ronaldo's character alongside all the other parts that I had been compelled by—his ego, his emotion, his desire and his penchant for the sublime. I was not under any illusions about the inherent goodness of man, so perhaps it was this grim predictability that I mistakenly left outside the frame when I watched him play. There are many ways to love football, but the hardest for me has been to see all of it, the glorious and the grotesque, and still find a way back. I should have given up on Cristiano Ronaldo, and the pleasure of his ability, long ago.

The world's greatest footballers do not become great alone. In their early careers they rely on families, coaches and support networks—people that are rooting for their success as an extension of themselves. Once they begin to make it, they rely on us, not to maintain their greatness but to acknowledge it and celebrate it. In a game watched by hundreds of millions of people, you do not get to the top without also being the subject of a multitude of essays and interviews and tweets and compilation videos and hundreds of millions of people engaging with them.

Ronaldo is the most followed footballer on social media. His first Juventus game, a friendly in Villar Perosa against Juventus B, saw 5000 fans overwhelm the small town at the foot of the Italian Alps. In the first 24 hours after signing a contract worth over £100 million, the club sold over half a million Ronaldo shirts.

It is his fame, this sense of hypervisibility, that has engineered this uniquely painful situation for Kathryn and her family, in which her trauma is not only re-surfaced but has been offered up to a global public for scrutiny. Ronaldo sits with ease on this branded pedestal because we helped build it, adorn it and place him there. It's the only thing we know how to do with exceptional talents—to fashion heroes out of their gifts so we can claim proximity to the things we are in awe of. This is painfully true of men and especially athletes, who often occupy an unchallenged place in popular culture, at the apex of physical dominance, masculinity and “cool.”

That is not to say Ronaldo's fame and excess isn't and hasn't been conditional on replicating and reinforcing ideals of masculinity which, although they shift slightly and occasionally, are unflinchingly symptomatic of a white supremacist heteropatriarchy. However, this position has not yet been compromised by violence against women. Time and time again we are shown that not only is the justice system improperly equipped to fulfil its purpose, male power is not diminished by male violence. In fact, incidences of violence against women (<http://www.itv.com/news/2014-11-21/mob-like-behaviour-stopped-sheffield-united-from-taking-rapist-evans-back-co-chairman/>) and the ensuing denials (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/feb/24/adam-johnson-quizzed-in-court-over-googling-age-of-consent>) can enable dangerous narratives of persecution that entrench supporters further

(<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-north-east-wales-20207408>). For some, the mythology of a great champion is incomplete without a thread of victimhood to carry through as something to have overcome.

Statements from Juventus and the Portuguese FA have only served to confirm this, with the former explicit (<https://twitter.com/juventusfcen/status/1047912523494842370>) in their disdain for survivors of sexual violence (<https://twitter.com/juventusfcen/status/1047912694832123905>) and unwavering support of Ronaldo. If nothing else, it is a good time to remember that when someone shows us who they are, we should believe them. Juventus's insistence on Ronaldo's innocence relies on a belief that supremely talented men are not capable of doing supremely awful things, or that sport is valued more than victims of sexual violence, or that a once-in-a-lifetime footballer is worth more than the millions of lifetimes of pain we carry.

The things we have written about Ronaldo, the joy we may have felt and the time we've poured into him, are not necessarily invalidated because of this. But they have to be rendered unimportant. What matters in this current moment is Kathryn Mayorga and all other survivors, particularly those for whom football has carried significance. By standing with Kathryn, we are not condemning the whole sport, nor are we condemning the transcendence of great champions—we are asking for these things not to be used as a shield to protect one man from the consequences of his own actions. It's precisely because of the reverence in which we hold football that we must hold those who have benefited from our devotion accountable for their actions.

As it stands, Ronaldo will continue playing for Juventus and Portugal, striding past these accusations with goals and assists and dramatic celebrations, aided by sports media, an expensively assembled legal team, and patriarchy. This sport is heavily invested in its heroes and this world is heavily invested in football. But football has long been about so much more than what is contained on a pitch within ninety minutes. For football to mean anything moving forward, it has to live as more than the men we have admired, the men who failed us.

Sanaa works in community sport in London and spends the rest of her time hopelessly devoted to Everton, first touches and watching whatever football she can stream. [Follow her on Twitter at @sanaa_mq](https://twitter.com/sanaa_mq). (https://twitter.com/sanaa_mq).

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